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September 23, 1969

L-17990

AIR MAIL SPECIAL DELIVERY

Mr. Charles Bolté
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
345 E. 46th Street
New York, N. Y. 10017

Dear Charles:

I believe the time has come for you to call together a group of citizens similar to those who gathered at Bermuda two years ago, to speak and act in support of the President's recent proposition, "the time has come to end this war." I believe the President should be helped to that end by clear, uncompromising, conscientious statements of dissent to the present course of Administration policy, and the affirmation of principles that would move us unconditionally and soon toward total extrication from the conflict in Vietnam.

Prolonged combat and campus unrest lie ahead, and may move the Administration's position: the first at the cost of many young lives, Vietnamese and American, the second at the risk of the careers, further alienation and possible imprisonment of others among our most idealistic and capable youth. I am proposing that the effect of such sacrifices be enhanced by public declarations of aims, conscience and belief by those who need not bear such risks. I should not be happy to believe that the process of ending this war, or our participation in it, had been lengthened to any degree whatever by a failure of forthrightness by me or by those I would like to respect.

When we met two years ago, we faced the possible imminence of disastrous escalation. That seems not true today. Nor do I think that the President has made a conscious decision in favor of an indefinite involvement in Vietnam. On the contrary, I suspect he believes that his program of U.S. troop reduction is part of a policy of extrication. But I believe he is misled. Conversations with friends in Washington, and newspaper accounts, indicate that his intent is hedged with constraints that will, in my opinion contrary to his hopes, keep the U.S. involved in Vietnam at a high level of combat, with 200-300,000 troops, for just so long as he holds to present Administration views. A scheme of conditional disengagement simply fails to extricate, if, as I expect, the conditions are not going to be met.

The President may think himself prepared to change his assessments, if they prove invalid over time; in fact, I suspect that he plans explicitly to reconsider them after a year or so, meanwhile expecting to buy this much time, or a few years more, by reducing troops down to 200-300,000: "then we'll see." Why press him now to do more? Why not just wait a year, until his notions of what is likely, reasonable, acceptable, or attainable are invalidated or modified by events, counting on him to do then what he ought better to decide to do now?

We should not wait that long, for two reasons:

1. It should not be regarded as "acceptable" that 10 to 12,000 Americans, and more than 100,000 Vietnamese, should pay with their lives in the next year in one more experiment to disconfirm what are, by now, quite unreasonable expectations.
2. Even if all his current reasons for staying in should have evaporated by then, the President would find them supplanted a year from now by a new motive far more weighty: his own increased political stakes and commitment of prestige, raised by another year of spending lives and money and of issuing public statements defending his approach.

It might seem presumptuous to suggest that he might not fully foresee the latter effect -- his greater difficulty in getting out one or two years from now -- but why should he be different in this respect from his four predecessors? The last two, especially, almost surely overestimated, early on, their ability later to change their minds and their policies. They underestimated the political costs in terms of commitment of what seemed to them prudent actions "buying time," purchasing "flexibility," preserving options and reducing uncertainty: policies of a sort, in other contexts, it is almost an institutional reflex of my organization to recommend. This process of escalating Administration commitment has already begun, no doubt, but may not, quite yet, be irreversible. The phrase "Nixon's War" is already settling here and there upon the newsprint and in discussion, like early autumn leaves; but still only with the susurrus of a cliché-to-be.

The truth, as I see it, is that the President will never get below 200-300,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam (or perhaps cannot even get down to that level, in the face of combined offensives against this cost-cutting strategy by the VC, the GVN, and the JCS) without changing publicly his aims, premises or expectations. To wait now for him to learn this from events in South Vietnam and Paris, over the course of many months, may well be to leave the decision to a time when he would no longer feel he could afford publicly to make these changes. Which means we could be stuck, perhaps for years, at a level of casualties, costs, and dissension as harmful, unjustifiable and unacceptable as at present (even if smaller:

which may not be the case). And over a longer period of frustration, this could even reintroduce the prospect of escalation.

Here are some of the beliefs that seem to underlie the present Administration's course of action:

1. Costs and casualties can be reduced sharply (for instance, well under 100 casualties a week) in about a year and a half, by reducing U.S. forces down to 200-300,000.
2. Campus unrest and other dissent will be low during this process of reduction, and the reduced level of costs, troops and casualties (the communists being unable to impose higher casualties) would be politically "acceptable" for several more years, or indefinitely.
3. The GVN and RVNAF will probably improve steadily, to a point that will permit further reduction of U.S. troops.
4. With the war thus politically sustainable by the U.S., the DRV will eventually compromise on a face-saving political settlement (not requiring major change in the GVN, or compelling us to criticize, pressure or abandon the Thieu/Ky government). (Or, "The guerilla loses if he does not win": an apparent reversion to the position of the preceding Administration, reversing Kissinger's 1968 formula.)
5. If one or more of the above favorable expectations fails to be achieved in the course of one or two years, the U.S. Government can at that time shift its policy to that of unconditional extrication about as easily as at present, or more so.

In addition to these expectational premises, the Administration seems to be committed to several crucial value-judgments or constraints:

- a. Another year's casualties and other costs (and the clear risk of several years' more than that) are "acceptable" and worthwhile in view of the presumed prospects of improving the political outcome.
- b. It is inadmissible, on grounds of general policy toward allies ("We shouldn't have been mean to deGaulle") publicly to criticize or disassociate ourselves from the current GVN, or, publicly or privately, to pressure it or act to bring about change in its composition.
- c. To "abandon" the GVN by carrying out a program of total withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Vietnam, without agreement by the GVN or corresponding withdrawal by present NVA forces is "unthinkable," not to be examined or considered seriously.

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- d. A U.S. withdrawal having achieved no part of our original objectives (especially if the GVN and RVNAF collapse quickly) would inflict enormous, and "unacceptable" damage to our prestige and influence in Asia and elsewhere.

I cannot say that the forecasts above are certain to fail, but I think that highly likely. I will not debate the points here; familiar arguments from our experience in Vietnam, in my opinion, still apply. Briefly, I believe that expectations 1 and 5 above are very dubious and 3 and 4 still more so. As for the values and constraints, I would take issue with each, but I will only point out here that, in the light of the preceding estimates, they would require us to endure a costly stalemate in Vietnam indefinitely. The actual evolution that I think likely to come about if the Administration now acts upon the basis of these projections and values is not acceptable at all. It does not involve improvement in our position in any fundamental respect. It would be a future maddeningly, tragically like the past; it would mean staying in, not getting out, and not for one year but for at least several, with an ending no less painful when it comes than it would be today.

Two points above (4 and c) do call for further comment. On the first, it seems clear now that the DRV is not so anxious to get all U.S. troops out of Vietnam as to accept a ceasefire while conceding the continued authority, till after elections, of the present GVN with U.S. support; or, with the present GVN in place, to withdraw all NVA troops. I won't speculate here on the reasons or the reasonableness of their position, but it appears extremely unlikely that anything that may happen in South Vietnam or the U.S. in the next several years is going to change it. Contrary to what the Administration may imagine, and claims, lack of dissent in the U.S. would not do it. (It may be urgent to affirm this publicly and authoritatively; so that dissent -- which is inevitable -- may get due hearing from the Administration, and, even more, as a firebreak against later "stab-in-the-back" McCarthyism.) Yet I am not willing to leave Hanoi with a veto on the ending of the U.S. role in this conflict, any more than I am willing to give this power to the GVN.

The present GVN and the NLF, I would say, each authentically represents a minority faction of the South Vietnamese people that prefers to continue the conflict at its present level than to make major political concessions to the other. Even together, these two factions probably do not comprise a majority of the South Vietnamese people, most of whom, I am convinced would now prefer any political settlement -- even total victory of the VC or of the GVN -- to the continuation of this war, and specifically to the continued burden of U.S. firepower in their midst.

If they perceived sufficiently pressing demands of U.S. national security, some Americans would be persuaded to ignore such Vietnamese preferences, however widely held. But who would claim that such compelling security interests operate now? (Rather, I would say, even narrow national interests are better served, on balance, by getting out than by staying in.) It must follow, as the President stated before the UN, that the wishes of the South Vietnamese people should be

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controlling. Can the Administration believe that the majority of the South Vietnamese people want this war to go on, in preference to concessions to the NLF that would end it?

I don't believe, in fact, that many U.S. Government officials do believe this; nor do many any longer believe that the U.S. interests involved are, in comparison, overwhelming. But have they drawn the moral implications of these judgments? To paraphrase a colleague of mine, when it is not the case that we must prolong the war against the desires of those afflicted, we must not do so. And this applies with equal force to our expenditure of bombs, shells and napalm even if U.S. ground force presence, and casualties, should be reduced to zero. Where national interests are limited as they are here (without saying they are negligible), either the burden to the U.S. or to the Vietnamese is sufficient ground for ending our involvement.

Vu Van Thai, former Ambassador of South Vietnam to the U.S., has recently commented to me: the current GVN represents a ruling elite whose status and power could not survive an end of the war and of American support, even if that came with the total defeat or fadeout of the communists. Thus, their interests are at this point directly opposed to ours; they are best served neither by victory nor by settlement, but by prolongation of the war. Indeed, neither the NLF nor the GVN can truly claim to speak for the majority of the Vietnamese people on the issue of war and peace; and the demands of neither can legitimately compel or even justify our prolonging our participation in this conflict, with the use of firepower that inevitably accompanies our troop presence.

I would like to see change in the GVN in the direction of a provisional government willing seriously to negotiate a ceasefire and provisional political settlement with the NLF, and acceptable to the NLF in such negotiations. I believe that individuals exist who could make up such a government, and that the majority of the Vietnamese people would prefer such a government to the present GVN. But I see very little prospect of this coming about; nor would I encourage the U.S. to involve itself directly in such change, or wish to see our extrication conditional upon such developments. That leaves me with a strong desire to make the objective of unconditional withdrawal thinkable, respectable, and shortly, acceptable in public discussion and to the Administration. The route to that is to invalidate the Administration's hope of a relatively silent public over the next year. I propose to speak out as I believe, and I would welcome company. I invite you to help me find it.

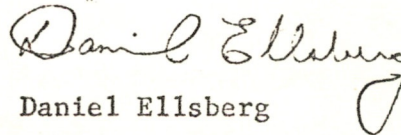
What I am proposing is that a group be convened to discuss and, if some agreement can be reached, to declare a policy aimed unconditionally at U.S. extrication from this war: not extrication "if..." or "assuming that..." or "on the condition..." but a policy that necessarily "assures" only one thing, U.S. disengagement. Alternative policies should be discussed and criticized, but they should be alternatives addressed to the goal of extrication.

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At least two policies deserve consideration. One would remove U.S. obstacles to, and press strongly for, change in the makeup of the GVN toward a broad provisional government capable of negotiating a ceasefire (meanwhile carrying out more rapid U.S. troop reduction than at present). The other would call for unconditional withdrawal of all U.S. personnel out of Vietnam within one year; with immediate sharp curtailment of U.S. offensive operations and use of firepower.

Other U.S. interests and aims should also be discussed, but, I would propose, on the clear understanding that they are to be regarded as strictly secondary and subordinate to the principle aim. There should by now be an extreme burden of proof upon any proposal that might compromise the certainty of ceasing the -- to use precise, necessary words -- bloody, hopeless, uncompelled, hence surely immoral prolongation of U.S. involvement in this war.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Daniel Ellsberg".

Daniel Ellsberg

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